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**REVIEW**

- 6178 COVID-19 infection and liver injury: Clinical features, biomarkers, potential mechanisms, treatment, and management challenges  
*Sivandzadeh GR, Askari H, Safarpour AR, Ejtehad F, Raeis-Abdollahi E, Vaez Lari A, Abazari MF, Tarkesh F, Bagheri Lankarani K*
- 6201 Gastrointestinal manifestations of systemic sclerosis: An updated review  
*Luquez-Mindiola A, Atuesta AJ, Gómez-Aldana AJ*

**MINIREVIEWS**

- 6218 Mesenchymal stem cell-derived exosomes: An emerging therapeutic strategy for normal and chronic wound healing  
*Zeng QL, Liu DW*
- 6234 Role of autophagy in cholangiocarcinoma: Pathophysiology and implications for therapy  
*Ninfolé E, Pinto C, Benedetti A, Marziani M, Maroni L*

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****Case Control Study**

- 6244 Risk factors for intussusception in children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura: A case-control study  
*Zhao Q, Yang Y, He SW, Wang XT, Liu C*

**Retrospective Study**

- 6254 Sequential therapy with combined trans-papillary endoscopic naso-pancreatic and endoscopic retrograde pancreatic drainage for pancreatic pseudocysts  
*He YG, Li J, Peng XH, Wu J, Xie MX, Tang YC, Zheng L, Huang XB*
- 6268 Retrospective study of effect of whole-body vibration training on balance and walking function in stroke patients  
*Xie L, Yi SX, Peng QF, Liu P, Jiang H*
- 6278 Risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of bile duct cysts in adults  
*Wu X, Li BL, Zheng CJ, He XD*
- 6287 Diagnostic and prognostic value of secreted protein acidic and rich in cysteine in the diffuse large B-cell lymphoma  
*Pan PJ, Liu JX*
- 6300 Jumbo cup in hip joint renovation may cause the center of rotation to increase  
*Peng YW, Shen JM, Zhang YC, Sun JY, Du YQ, Zhou YG*

**Clinical Trials Study**

- 6308** Effect of exercise training on left ventricular remodeling in patients with myocardial infarction and possible mechanisms  
*Cai M, Wang L, Ren YL*

**Observational Study**

- 6319** Analysis of sleep characteristics and clinical outcomes of 139 adult patients with infective endocarditis after surgery  
*Hu XM, Lin CD, Huang DY, Li XM, Lu F, Wei WT, Yu ZH, Liao HS, Huang F, Huang XZ, Jia FJ*
- 6329** Health-related risky behaviors and their risk factors in adolescents with high-functioning autism  
*Sun YJ, Xu LZ, Ma ZH, Yang YL, Yin TN, Gong XY, Gao ZL, Liu YL, Liu J*
- 6343** Selection of internal fixation method for femoral intertrochanteric fractures using a finite element method  
*Mu JX, Xiang SY, Ma QY, Gu HL*

**META-ANALYSIS**

- 6357** Neoadjuvant chemotherapy for patients with resectable colorectal cancer liver metastases: A systematic review and meta-analysis  
*Zhang Y, Ge L, Weng J, Tuo WY, Liu B, Ma SX, Yang KH, Cai H*

**CASE REPORT**

- 6380** Ruptured intracranial aneurysm presenting as cerebral circulation insufficiency: A case report  
*Zhao L, Zhao SQ, Tang XP*
- 6388** Prostatic carcinosarcoma seven years after radical prostatectomy and hormonal therapy for prostatic adenocarcinoma: A case report  
*Huang X, Cai SL, Xie LP*
- 6393** Pyogenic arthritis, pyoderma gangrenosum, and acne syndrome in a Chinese family: A case report and review of literature  
*Lu LY, Tang XY, Luo GJ, Tang MJ, Liu Y, Yu XJ*
- 6403** Malaria-associated secondary hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis: A case report  
*Zhou X, Duan ML*
- 6410** Ileal hemorrhagic infarction after carotid artery stenting: A case report and review of the literature  
*Xu XY, Shen W, Li G, Wang XF, Xu Y*
- 6418** Inflammatory myofibroblastic tumor of the pancreatic neck: A case report and review of literature  
*Chen ZT, Lin YX, Li MX, Zhang T, Wan DL, Lin SZ*
- 6428** Management of heterotopic cesarean scar pregnancy with preservation of intrauterine pregnancy: A case report  
*Chen ZY, Zhou Y, Qian Y, Luo JM, Huang XF, Zhang XM*

- 6435** Manifestation of severe pneumonia in anti-PL-7 antisynthetase syndrome and B cell lymphoma: A case report  
*Xu XL, Zhang RH, Wang YH, Zhou JY*
- 6443** Disseminated infection by *Fusarium solani* in acute lymphocytic leukemia: A case report  
*Yao YF, Feng J, Liu J, Chen CF, Yu B, Hu XP*
- 6450** Primary hepatic neuroendocrine tumor – <sup>18</sup>F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography/computed tomography findings: A case report  
*Rao YY, Zhang HJ, Wang XJ, Li MF*
- 6457** Malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor in an elderly patient with superficial spreading melanoma: A case report  
*Yang CM, Li JM, Wang R, Lu LG*
- 6464** False positive anti-hepatitis A virus immunoglobulin M in autoimmune hepatitis/primary biliary cholangitis overlap syndrome: A case report  
*Yan J, He YS, Song Y, Chen XY, Liu HB, Rao CY*
- 6469** Successful totally laparoscopic right trihepatectomy following conversion therapy for hepatocellular carcinoma: A case report  
*Zhang JJ, Wang ZX, Niu JX, Zhang M, An N, Li PF, Zheng WH*
- 6478** Primary small cell esophageal carcinoma, chemotherapy sequential immunotherapy: A case report  
*Wu YH, Zhang K, Chen HG, Wu WB, Li XJ, Zhang J*
- 6485** Subdural fluid collection rather than meningitis contributes to hydrocephalus after cervical laminoplasty: A case report  
*Huang HH, Cheng ZH, Ding BZ, Zhao J, Zhao CQ*
- 6493** Phlegmonous gastritis developed during chemotherapy for acute lymphocytic leukemia: A case report  
*Saito M, Morioka M, Izumiyama K, Mori A, Ogasawara R, Kondo T, Miyajima T, Yokoyama E, Tanikawa S*
- 6501** Spinal epidural hematoma after spinal manipulation therapy: Report of three cases and a literature review  
*Liu H, Zhang T, Qu T, Yang CW, Li SK*
- 6510** Abdominal hemorrhage after peritoneal dialysis catheter insertion: A rare cause of luteal rupture: A case report  
*Gan LW, Li QC, Yu ZL, Zhang LL, Liu Q, Li Y, Ou ST*
- 6515** Concealed mesenteric ischemia after total knee arthroplasty: A case report  
*Zhang SY, He BJ, Xu HH, Xiao MM, Zhang JJ, Tong PJ, Mao Q*
- 6522** Chylothorax following posterior low lumbar fusion surgery: A case report  
*Huang XM, Luo M, Ran LY, You XH, Wu DW, Huang SS, Gong Q*
- 6531** Non-immune hydrops fetalis: Two case reports  
*Maranto M, Cigna V, Orlandi E, Cucinella G, Lo Verso C, Duca V, Picciotto F*

- 6538** Bystander effect and abscopal effect in recurrent thymic carcinoma treated with carbon-ion radiation therapy: A case report  
*Zhang YS, Zhang YH, Li XJ, Hu TC, Chen WZ, Pan X, Chai HY, Ye YC*
- 6544** Management of an intracranial hypotension patient with diplopia as the primary symptom: A case report  
*Wei TT, Huang H, Chen G, He FF*
- 6552** Spontaneous rupture of adrenal myelolipoma as a cause of acute flank pain: A case report  
*Kim DS, Lee JW, Lee SH*
- 6557** Neonatal necrotizing enterocolitis caused by umbilical arterial catheter-associated abdominal aortic embolism: A case report  
*Huang X, Hu YL, Zhao Y, Chen Q, Li YX*
- 6566** Primary mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue lymphoma in the midbrain: A case report  
*Zhao YR, Hu RH, Wu R, Xu JK*
- 6575** Extensive cutaneous metastasis of recurrent gastric cancer: A case report  
*Chen JW, Zheng LZ, Xu DH, Lin W*

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## Retrospective Study

## Risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of bile duct cysts in adults

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## Abstract

## BACKGROUND

Bile duct cyst (BDC) is a rare congenital bile duct malformation. The incidence of bile duct malignancy in BDC patients is markedly higher than that in the general population. However, few studies have been conducted on the risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis in BDC patients.

## AIM

To analyze the risk factors associated with preoperative carcinogenesis in BDC patients.

## METHODS

The medical records of BDC patients treated at our hospital between January 2012 and December 2018 were retrospectively reviewed. We constructed a database and compared the characteristics of BDC patients with dysplasia and carcinoma against those with benign cysts. The risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis were identified using univariate and multivariate analyses.

## RESULTS

The cohort comprised 109 BDC patients. Ten patients had preoperative dysplasia or adenocarcinoma. Univariate and multivariate analyses showed that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm [odds ratio (OR), 6.551; 95% confidence interval (CI), 1.351 to 31.763;  $P = 0.020$ ] and Todani type IV (OR, 7.675; 95% CI, 1.584 to 37.192;  $P = 0.011$ ) were independent factors associated with preoperative carcinogenesis.

## CONCLUSION

BDC is a premalignant condition. Our findings show that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV are independent risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of BDC. They are therefore useful for deciding on the

additional data are available.

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appropriate treatment strategy, especially in asymptomatic patients.

**Key Words:** Choledochal cyst; Carcinoma; Dysplasia; Risk factors; Gallbladder wall; Todani type

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**Core Tip:** Bile duct cyst (BDC) is a rare congenital bile duct malformation that is more common in Asian countries. The incidence of bile duct malignancy in BDC patients is 20- to 30-fold higher than that in the general population. However, few studies have been conducted on the risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of BDC. The present study retrospectively analyzed 109 BDC patients and found that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV were independently associated with preoperative carcinogenesis. The clinical data and long-term follow-up information of ten BDC patients with dysplasia or carcinoma were also presented.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bile duct cyst (BDC), or biliary dilatation, is a rare congenital bile duct malformation that can occur in the intrahepatic biliary system, extrahepatic biliary tree, or both. Todani *et al*[1-3] systematically described and classified BDC in 1977 and then updated the classification in 1997 and 2003. BDC is more common in women, with a female-to-male ratio of 4:1[4]. The incidence rate of BDC is higher in Asian countries than in Western countries[5]. Most patients with BDC are diagnosed in the first decade of life, and only around 20% go undiagnosed into adulthood[6].

The currently recommended treatment modality for BDC is complete cyst excision plus Roux-en-Y hepaticojejunostomy[7,8]. Liver resection and transplantation are treatment choices of BDC type V[6]. For patients with symptoms like abdominal pain, jaundice, and fever, surgery is more acceptable. However, the necessity and timing of surgery are a difficult choice in asymptomatic patients due to the high incidence of postoperative complications. Most studies recommend complete cyst removal even in asymptomatic patients because the incidence of bile duct malignancy in BDC patients is 20- to 30-fold higher than that in the general population[6,9-11]. However, few studies have been conducted on the risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of BDC patients[12,13]. Precise estimates of the risk of preoperative carcinogenesis in BDC are lacking[14], and the patient features that are indications for surgery are still unknown. Thus, the present study aimed to analyze the potential risk factors associated with preoperative carcinogenesis in patients with BDC to provide a deeper understanding of BDC and determine the optimal treatment options for asymptomatic BDC patients.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

All the medical records of BDC patients treated at our hospital between January 2012 and December 2018 were retrospectively reviewed. Patients who were diagnosed with BDC by both preoperative imaging and postoperative pathology, and at least 18 years old were selected, while those who did not undergo operation or had incomplete medical records were excluded. Clinical data were compiled from both inpatient and outpatient medical records, and a retrospective database was constructed. The demographic characteristics, symptoms, laboratory tests, operation details, pathology information, and prognoses were analyzed. This study was approved by the Peking Union Medical College Hospital Institutional Review Board (S-K1483). The requirement of informed consent for publication of data was waived owing to the

retrospective nature of the study.

Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (version 25.0, IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, United States). Continuous variables are presented as the mean  $\pm$  SD and were analyzed using Student's *t* test. Categorical variables are shown as an absolute number or frequency and were analyzed using the  $\chi^2$  test or Fisher's exact test as appropriate. Logistic multivariate regression analysis was performed to identify potential independent risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of BDC patients. A *P* value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

## RESULTS

A total of 129 adult patients with BDC were treated at our institution during the study period, and we excluded 20 patients who did not undergo operation due to severe underlying disease. Thus, the cohort comprised 109 patients with BDC, and they were further divided into two groups based on pathology results: Group A comprised patients with benign pathology (*n* = 99), while group B comprised patients with dysplasia or carcinoma (*n* = 10). The preoperative dysplasia/carcinoma rate was 9.2% (10/109). The demographic characteristics, symptoms, and laboratory tests by group are shown in Table 1. There was no significant difference between the two groups. The mean age at admission was 40.4  $\pm$  15.0 years (range, 18-80 years), and the male-to-female ratio was 1:4.7. Abdominal pain (82.6%) was the most common preoperative symptom, followed by fever (26.6%) and jaundice (12.8%). Abnormal pancreatic biliary duct was confirmed in 55 (50.5%) patients *via* endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography or magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography. Stratified analysis by age group was also conducted to further analyze the correlation between age and dysplasia/carcinoma rates (Table 2).

All patients were diagnosed with BDC by both preoperative imaging and postoperative pathology. The operation details, pathology information, and Todani classification are shown in Table 3. The number of patients with gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm, cyst transverse diameter > 3 cm, and Todani type IV was significantly higher in group B than in group A. Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV were independently associated with preoperative carcinogenesis, with odds ratios of 6.551 and 7.675, respectively (Table 4). A flow chart of treatment recommendations for patients with BDC is shown in Figure 1.

As of December 2020, 97 (89.0%) patients were followed for a mean duration of 59.7  $\pm$  24.6 mo (range, 6-102 mo). No postoperative carcinoma was observed. In group B, nine out of ten patients were followed. The detailed clinical features of patients in group B are presented in Table 5. In total, 4, 3, and 3 patients had dysplasia or carcinoma in the cyst, the gallbladder, and in both the cyst and the gallbladder, respectively. Five patients had dysplasia and the other five had adenocarcinoma. The longest follow-up time was 81 mo, and the patient remains alive and disease free to date.

## DISCUSSION

The incidence of BDC diagnoses in adult patients has increased worldwide due to the widespread use of health screening and improvements in noninvasive bile duct imaging[15,16]. Approximately 10%-30% of adult patients with BDC develop carcinoma[9,17,18]. The first case of neoplastic change within BDC was reported by Irwin *et al*[19] in 1944. The tumor may arise in the cyst wall, gallbladder, undilated parts of the biliary tree, and even in remnant tissue after operation. The pathogenesis of preoperative and postoperative carcinogenesis of BDC is entirely different[20]. Preoperative carcinoma is mainly caused by abnormal confluent pancreatic juice that can erode the bile duct epithelium[21,22]. This problem is resolved after operation because the pancreatic and biliary drainage is separated. Meanwhile, postoperative carcinogenesis is primarily caused by recurrent cholangitis, which can be avoided *via* complete cyst dissection and proper bile duct flow. In the present study, we only focused on preoperative carcinogenesis.

As observed in esophageal and colon cancer, the progression of carcinoma in BDC involves simple hyperplasia and dysplasia that ultimately leads to the formation of invasive carcinoma[23-26]. Carcinogenesis may be related to dysplasia of the bile duct epithelium, and thus we analyzed the risk factors for both dysplasia and carcinoma in

**Table 1** Demographic data, symptoms, and laboratory test findings for patients with bile duct cyst

	Overall cohort (n = 109)	Group A (n = 99)	Group B (n = 10)	P value
Male/female (n)	19/90	19/80	0/10	0.277
Age at symptom onset (yr)	34.6 ± 15.5	34.7 ± 15.4	34.0 ± 16.5	0.892
Age at admission (yr)	40.4 ± 15.0	40.6 ± 15.0	38.1 ± 16.0	0.611
BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	22.0 ± 3.3	22.1 ± 3.4	21.6 ± 2.2	0.634
Smoking (n)	7	7	0	1.000
Abdominal pain (n)	90	82	8	1.000
Fever (n)	29	26	3	1.000
Jaundice (n)	14	11	3	0.228
CA19-9 > 34 U/mL (n)	9	8	1	0.594
CEA > 5 ng/mL (n)	1	0	1	0.092
APBD (n)	55	51	4	0.717

BMI: Body mass index; CA19-9: Carbohydrate antigen 19-9; CEA: Carcinoembryonic antigen; APBD: Abnormal pancreatic biliary duct.

**Table 2** Stratified analysis for association between age and dysplasia/carcinoma rates

Age (yr)	Total, n	Dysplasia/carcinoma, n (%)	P value
18-30	35	4 (11.4)	0.866
31-40	21	2 (9.5)	
41-50	24	2 (8.3)	
51-60	13	0 (0)	
≥ 61	16	2 (12.5)	

this study to further clarify the risk factors for carcinogenesis and determine the optimal treatment modality given that the need to treat in asymptomatic patients is based on the risk of developing a malignancy[27,28]. A meta-analysis reported that the preoperative malignancy rate of BDC is 7.3% [14]. The preoperative rates of both dysplasia and carcinoma and only carcinoma in this study (9.2% and 4.6%, respectively) are consistent with those reported in the literature. Several previous studies have identified potential risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis in patients with BDC[14,26,29]. Although some variables such as age and cyst type have been presented, the results are still controversial. We examined the association between dysplasia/carcinoma and several variables and found that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV were independent risk factors for carcinogenesis. For patients with these characteristics, surgery should be highly recommended. Although complete cyst excision is the recommended treatment modality, it is not always achievable especially in Todani type IV patients with widespread intrahepatic cysts. For these patients, we recommend to remove cysts as much as possible and rebuild proper bile duct flow because proper bile duct flow, rather than complete excision, is the most critical factor determining treatment outcomes of BDC[20]. Xia *et al*[20] reported that complete or incomplete cyst excision made no significant difference in terms of long-term biliary function and late postoperative complications in Todani type IVa cysts with proper bile flow.

Chronic inflammation of the bile duct leads to K-ras mutations, cellular atypia, overexpression of the p53 encoding protein, and loss of heterozygosity of p53 at the molecular level[30-33]. These mutations could result in malignant transformation and cause an association between chronic inflammation and bile duct carcinoma. Concurrently, metaplastic changes of the bile duct epithelium are considered premalignant lesions that progress to bile duct carcinoma[32], and this is frequently observed in chronic bile duct inflammation. Bile duct inflammation causes the gallbladder wall to thicken to > 0.3 cm, and this could explain why such thickness is a risk factor for carcinogenesis. Some previous studies also reported the thickness of the gallbladder

**Table 3** Operation details, pathology information, and Todani types for patients with bile duct cyst

	Overall cohort (n = 109)	Group A (n = 99)	Group B (n = 10)	P value
Operative time (min)	219.2 ± 64.8	215.8 ± 61.6	249.5 ± 86.6	0.119
Bleeding amount (mL)	212.3 ± 210.0	204.8 ± 202.0	283.0 ± 277.5	0.265
Max diameter of GB (cm)	7.8 ± 1.7	7.9 ± 1.7	7.0 ± 1.7	0.147
GB wall thickness > 0.3 cm (n)	20	15	5	0.022
TD of cyst > 3 cm (n)	46	38	8	0.028
Cyst wall thickness > 0.3 cm (n)	8	8	0	1.000
Bile duct stone (n)	22	21	1	0.668
Todani classification (n) <sup>1</sup>				0.031
I	74	71	3	
III	1	1	0	
IVa	31	24	7	
V	3	3	0	

<sup>1</sup>There was no patient with Todani type II or IVb.

GB: Gallbladder; TD: Transverse diameter.

**Table 4** Multivariate analysis for risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of bile duct cyst

	P value	OR	95%CI
Gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm	0.020	6.551	1.351-31.763
Todani type IV	0.011	7.675	1.584-37.192
Transverse diameter of cyst > 3 cm	0.051	5.479	0.990-30.333

OR: Odds ratio; CI: Confidence interval.

wall as a predictor of premalignant mucosal transformation[34,35]. The incidence of cholangiocarcinoma varies between different types of BDC, with type I and type IV having the highest risk of malignant transformation[6,9,14]. Todani IV cysts were strongly associated with chronic inflammation of the bile duct and abnormal pancreaticobiliary duct junction[26,36]. Prolonged reflux of pancreatic secretions could lead to malignant degeneration of the bile duct epithelium[28], and these factors cause the high dysplasia and carcinoma rate. Ten Hove *et al*[14] reported Todani type I and IV as risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis, and He *et al*[12] reported a higher carcinogenesis rate in type I than in type IV. The difference between the findings of the current study and those in the literature might be caused by the limited number of patients with dysplasia and carcinoma in the current study.

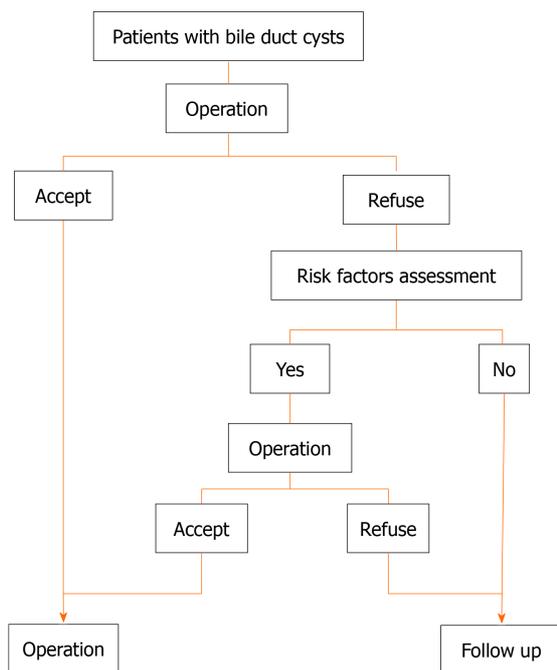
Age has been consistently reported as an independent risk factor for carcinogenesis [9,12,13], and the incidence of carcinogenesis particularly increased with high age at presentation[37,38]. However, we found no relationship between incidence and age in our study (Table 2) and this may be due to the following: First, the reported age-dependent increase in incidence was only for tumors, while the present study calculated the incidence of both dysplasia and carcinoma. Second, because of the popularity of health examination, the number of young patients diagnosed and treated is increasing, while the number of patients diagnosed at an older age is decreasing. Third, the sample size, particularly the number of patients with dysplasia or carcinoma was limited, and the possibility of selection bias could not be ruled out.

In the present study, all the patients with dysplasia and carcinoma were women. The reason may be that BDC is more common in women than in men. Further, at the molecular level, increased estrogen receptor expression in the biliary epithelium was found in patients with neoplastic changes[39]. Of the ten patients with dysplasia and carcinoma, nine were followed and had a mean survival time of 49.2 ± 21.5 mo, and seven were still alive and disease free at the last follow-up. The patient prognosis in

**Table 5** Clinical data of ten bile duct cyst patients with dysplasia or carcinoma

No.	Sex	Age (yr)	Todani type	Operation	Lesion location	Pathology	TNM stage <sup>1</sup>	Follow-up time (mo)	Outcome
1	F	39	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst	Mucinous adenocarcinoma	T4N0M0	40	Recurred 10 mo after surgery, alive with tumor
2	F	46	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Gallbladder	Mucinous adenocarcinoma	T3N0M0	6	Survived disease free for 6 mo after surgery, then lost to follow-up
3	F	44	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst	Moderate dysplasia	--	52	Disease-free survival
4	F	26	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst + gallbladder	Mild dysplasia	--	53	Disease-free survival
5	F	61	I	CH + CE + HJ	Gallbladder	Adenocarcinoma	T2N0M0	40	Disease-free survival
6	F	27	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst + gallbladder	Moderate dysplasia	--	66	Disease-free survival
7	F	33	IVa	Pancreaticoduodenectomy	Cyst	Adenocarcinoma	TisN0M0	81	Disease-free survival
8	F	18	I	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst + gallbladder	Mild dysplasia	--	40	Disease-free survival
9	F	65	I	CH + CE + HJ	Gallbladder	Adenocarcinoma	T1N0M0	65	Disease-free survival
10	F	22	IVa	CH + CE + HJ	Cyst	Mild dysplasia	--	--	Lost to follow-up

<sup>1</sup>Staging was according to the American Joint Committee on Cancer 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 Tumor Node Metastasis classification. CH: Cholecystectomy; CE: Cyst excision; HJ: Hepaticojejunostomy; TNM: Tumor node metastasis.



**Figure 1** Flow chart of treatment recommendations for patients with bile duct cyst. Operation is the currently recommended treatment modality for bile duct cyst. For patients who refuse surgery, risk factor assessment should be performed.

the current study was markedly better than that in the literature[12], and this may be because not only patients with carcinoma, but also those with dysplasia were also included in this study. Another possible reason was that the exclusion of 20 patients with severe underlying disease would lead to an improvement in overall outcomes.

This study has some limitations. First, the registration information and patient number could not be designated in advance due to its retrospective nature. Second, the study is confined to a single institution, and the number of patients is limited. Given that the number of BDC cases diagnosed and treated is increasing, prospective, observational, controlled, and multi-center clinical trials are needed to identify reliable

risk factors for malignancy in BDC.

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## CONCLUSION

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BDC is a rare congenital bile duct malformation. Prophylactic operation is recommended but not well accepted by all asymptomatic patients. Precise estimates of the risk of preoperative carcinogenesis in BDC are lacking. Our findings show that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV are independent risk factors for carcinogenesis of BDC in adults and are thus valuable in choosing the appropriate treatment strategy in these patients.

## ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

### **Research background**

The currently recommended treatment modality for bile duct cyst (BDC) is operation due to the high incidence of bile duct malignancy. However, few studies have been conducted on the risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis of BDC patients.

### **Research motivation**

To find out the patient features that are indications for surgery in BDC and provide better treatment recommendation.

### **Research objectives**

To analyze the risk factors associated with preoperative carcinogenesis in BDC patients.

### **Research methods**

This retrospective study included patients with BDC treated at our hospital between January 2012 and December 2018. A database containing demographic characteristics, symptoms, laboratory tests, operation details, pathology information, and prognoses was constructed. The characteristics of BDC with dysplasia/carcinoma were compared with benign cysts. Univariate and multivariate analyses were used to analyze the risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis.

### **Research results**

A total of 109 patients with BDC were included. Ten patients had preoperative dysplasia or adenocarcinoma. Univariate analysis showed that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm, cyst transverse diameter > 3 cm, and Todani type IV were associated with preoperative carcinogenesis. Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV were independently associated with preoperative carcinogenesis. The follow-up information of ten patients with dysplasia/carcinoma was presented.

### **Research conclusions**

BDC is a premalignant condition. Gallbladder wall thickness > 0.3 cm and Todani type IV are independent risk factors for preoperative carcinogenesis.

### **Research perspectives**

The two risk factors are useful for deciding on the appropriate treatment strategy, especially in asymptomatic patients.

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